

NIGER: AN EVIDENCE BASE FOR UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT CRISIS

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The current world-wide dialogue on the food crisis in Niger has been marked by frequent mis-information and mis-interpretation of the facts on the ground. This may impede delivering the appropriate emergency assistance, and treating the root causes of the current problem. These clarifications are therefore offered by the USAID-funded Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS NET).

1. Is there now or will there soon be a famine or mass starvation in Niger?

- There is a very severe, but localized, food security crisis in some pastoral and agro-pastoral areas of northern Maradi, Tillabery, Zinder, and Tahoua regions caused by an early end of last year's rains, locust damage to some pasture lands, current high prices of food, and chronic non-food causes of malnutrition. In these areas, high malnutrition rates, some of which reveal severe local problems, will inevitably be accompanied by increases in the "normally" high levels of infant mortality.
- This food crisis is not just a temporary emergency. It is the predictable and inevitable result of inadequately-addressed chronic poverty in the world's second poorest country. Although the willingness of much of the world to address these "famine" conditions in Niger is appropriate and welcome, without a similar commitment and prolonged attention to addressing the chronic issues that are at the heart of the current localized crises, the same problems will re-occur again soon.

2. Are there differences of opinion in Niger about whether there is or will soon be a famine?

- Collaborative monitoring by the Niger government (GON), WFP, FAO, CILSS, and FEWS NET since last October's harvest, and a joint national assessment completed in April 2005, found a relative consensus in these groups on the locally severe, but non-famine nature of the crisis.
- Recent media coverage and NGO reports have claimed famine conditions and the potential for the starvation of as many as 3.5 million people. The heavy and sensational media attention, and the possibility that more resources will be made available to treat the problem, create enormous pressures and incentives to agree with these claims, and may actually impede the market in delivering lower-cost food to those who need it most.

3. How many people are involved?

- The April 2005 joint food security assessment by the GON, FAO, WFP and FEWS NET estimated that 2.4 million of the 3.6 million people living in agropastoral areas were highly vulnerable to food insecurity. Of those, 1.2 million were judged to require some level of food aid. The latest estimate is that 874,000 persons face extreme food insecurity conditions, and 800,000 moderately food insecure need some level of food assistance. This number could temporarily grow in the next 6 weeks as pastoralists return north with their remaining livestock.
- Some press reports indicate that from 150,000 infants to 3.5 million people are threatened by starvation in Niger. There is no basis to expect that starvation is a likely outcome for these numbers of infants or people. Of those who will likely die from malnourishment, a substantial proportion is probably dying from conditions related to poor water quality, or other non-food related problems.

4. What was the impact of drought and locusts on national grain production?

- Drought and locusts have had only a modest impact on national grain production. Total grain production this past year was estimated at 2.6 million MT, which is 11% below the five-year average, leaving an import requirement of approximately 315,000 MT. This is 3% more than Niger's average cereal import requirement. Production in 2004/05 was 22% above that produced during the relatively poor 2000/2001 season, a year in which there was no major food security crisis.
- The "drought" itself has been frequently mis-interpreted. Average-to-good rains were experienced during the June-September 2004 main rainy season in most areas. But an early end of rains in the last month of this season hurt crop yields and pasture re-generation. Since then, dry conditions prevailed until the relatively early start of the main rainy season in May and June of 2005.

5. What was the impact of drought and locusts on pastoral conditions?

- Estimates from a joint CILSS/FEWS NET/WFP/GON mission in October 2004 indicated a fodder deficit in these pastoral areas that was 154% greater than the 2000 deficit, and at 4,642,000 tons, was the largest fodder deficit in Niger's history. One-third of this deficit was caused by locusts, and two-thirds was caused by drought.
- As they do in those conditions, pastoralists and agro-pastoralists began moving their animals south towards the coast, earlier than normal, to graze on the residue of harvested crops.
- High cereal prices and falling animal prices in the most affected pastoral and agro-pastoral areas, have led to some households having to liquidate assets in the face of these harsh terms of trade.

6. What are the current malnutrition rates, and what do they show?

- Niger does not have a very robust nutritional data collection and analysis system, so conclusions based on partial information have to be carefully interpreted. An April/May 2005 survey by MSF in selected areas of Tahoua and Maradi regions showed global acute malnutrition (GAM) rates of 19.5% and 19.3% and severe acute malnutrition (SAM) rates of 2.9% and 2.4%, respectively. A January 2005 survey conducted by Helen Keller International/WFP in Maradi and Zinder regions reported GAM rates of 13.4% for both regions, and SAM rates of 2.2% and 2.7%, respectively.
- These rates of acute malnutrition suggest a nutritional emergency in those areas surveyed. They can not, however, be extrapolated as representative of malnutrition conditions in other parts of those departments, nor of the whole country, nor of the 2.4 million people originally judged highly vulnerable to food insecurity in Niger.
- MSF has reported a sharp increase in the number of admissions to their Maradi therapeutic feeding centers. A pre-2005 NGO household survey found that the rates of chronic infant malnutrition in Maradi were the same in "well-off" as well as "poor" households, and speculated that childcare practices and water quality play a major role in malnutrition in this area. Additional information on the contributing factors for this increase would help to determine what type of humanitarian response is required. Additional nutritional assessments by SCF/UK are planned in Maradi and Zinder departments.

7. How do these rates compare with other years?

- There are few malnutrition surveys available from previous years to serve as a baseline for the current crisis. The FAO Country Nutrition Profile for Niger, published in 1998 (<http://www.fao.org/es/ESN/nutrition/ner-e.stm>) reviewed the evidence available in the 1990s, and concluded: "The nutritional situation in Niger is serious. The rates of malnutrition among children are high throughout the country: over 32% are stunted – half of them severely stunted – over 15% are

wasted, and over 36% are underweight. This situation is particularly worrying, as it has not improved over the last ten years. The anthropometric indicators for children clearly show that the Department of Maradi (20% wasting, 43% stunting) is most affected, ...”

8. What are some of the possible causes of rising malnutrition rates seen in these areas?

- Beyond a shortage of food, factors which could be causing, or contributing to the rising malnutrition rates, include water shortages and water quality, an inability to pay for medical services from Government facilities, poor child-care behaviors, and poor sanitation conditions and practices. All of these become more acute when occurring within the chronic structural poverty that characterizes much of this country.
- The same FAO Country Nutritional Profile noted above says this: “... numerous factors, such as the high prevalence of diarrhoeal disease, high rates of infant and child mortality (>350/1,000), very young first-delivery mothers and above all, feeding habits such as the early weaning of newborns 4-5 days after birth being fed on water, herbal teas and cow's milk, partially explain the contradictions observed between nutritional status and food consumption, especially in Maradi.”

9. How unusual are the coping strategies being practiced by people in the affected areas?

- The coping strategies observed this year in these areas are the traditional ones. This year, they appear to be stretched to the limit by continuing high cereal prices that translate into poor terms of trade in selling livestock to buy cereals.
- Large numbers of cattle were moved much earlier than normal to traditional dry-season grazing in designated reserves in coastal West African countries. While this preserves the herds, pastoralist households, especially women and children who normally remain in Niger, will be longer without meat and milk from their animals, and will have to buy more of their food by selling small animals, their assets, or their labor. This also results in larger numbers of males migrating to seek paid labor.
- The return of the herds from this southern movement began with the good rains that started in May and June. There have been cases where some herds were temporarily ‘stranded’ between their northern pastures that had yet to regenerate, and the areas they were leaving in order for planting to begin.
- Other signs of stress, such as high dependence on wild foods, migration, and liquidation of household assets are present, and are being more intensely employed, but are an integral part of traditional coping strategies in Niger, the second poorest country in the world.

10. How high are cereal prices?

- This year, millet and sorghum prices in most Nigerien markets did not decline as much as they normally do following a harvest. Prices have risen steadily since January 2005 and are now 75-80% above the last five year’s average. For pastoralist livelihoods, a concurrent decline in sales prices for small animals has meant that the cereal purchasing power for livestock-dependent households in agro-pastoral zones is only 25% of what it was a year ago.

11. Why are grain prices not going down as fast as they usually do?

- Assessments undertaken by CILSS (the regional inter-governmental body responsible for Sahelian food security) found that unusually high prices for millet and sorghum in neighboring markets in Nigeria, Ghana, Benin, and Ivory Coast have been drawing Sahelian grain to the south during the last few months. While the outflow from Niger is difficult to quantify, observers say that it has been significant and a major factor in driving up prices in the agro-pastoral and pastoral zones of Niger where purchasing power is the weakest.

- In most years, Niger imports cereals from surplus-producing areas of its neighbors in Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Mali. However, this year, each of these 3 countries imposed restrictions of exports, due to fears of famine and grain shortages, despite trade treaties that forbid that.
- CILSS has cautioned that overstatements of the severity of Sahelian food crises by the media, international agencies, and NGOs have had the unintended consequence of causing private traders to withhold stocks from the market, in anticipation of higher prices, or of local purchases by aid agencies, further pushing up cereal prices. These issues merit further study.

12. Are West African markets not working to fix the Sahelian food problems?

- West African grain markets are generally working very well, and perhaps too well. The high cereal price levels found in the Sahel are being driven by strong demand for Sahelian cereal production, and greater purchasing power in coastal West African countries.
- Markets in the most food-insecure zones in the Sahel (and in Niger) usually have higher cereal prices than elsewhere, due to the high costs of transporting grain to these sparsely-populated and poor areas. Although their governments are committed to open markets, high costs and infrastructure limitations do not allow Sahelian markets to efficiently collect surpluses, anticipate local and regional demand conditions, and supply foods to poor households at affordable prices.

13. How is the current rainy season progressing, and will it resolve the problem?

- The current rainy season has gotten off to a very good start in Niger. Farmers have been able to plant early; according to GON estimates, 92% of the area expected to be under cultivation had been planted by June 15 compared to 65% which is normal for this time of year.
- The favorable rains are improving pastures, although animal conditions will not rebound immediately. Cereal prices in other parts of the Sahel are beginning to fall and those in Niger will likely do the same. Prices for livestock should soon improve with good pasture conditions.
- The maize harvest is underway in Nigeria, Benin, Ghana, and Ivory Coast, and supplies of imported maize from those countries should soon be arriving in Niger. This will bring lower overall cereal prices.

14. What is the Government of Niger doing about the problem? Is it all it can do?

- Within the limitations of its own resources, the GON has been responsive to the current food security crisis in its continuous and collaborative monitoring and assessment of conditions, subsidized cereal sales from reserve stocks, a “loaning” of cereals in affected areas until the next harvest, and more recently, in distributing free food.

15. How does the severity of the current problems in Niger compare to others in West Africa and the Horn?

- Although the current food security crisis in Niger is serious, it affects far fewer people than current crises in Ethiopia, Somalia, Zimbabwe and Sudan (Darfur and Northern Bahr El Gazal). The situation in Niger is on par with that found in eastern Chad (in both the refugee camps and among local populations near the camps), and much more severe than those currently found in Mali and Mauritania.

16. What will be the likely impacts if current levels of assistance do not increase?

- In the short-term (until the middle to end of August), malnutrition rates, especially for children, are likely to continue to deteriorate, even if the rains continue to be good. Cereal prices should begin dropping almost immediately in response to the rains, and as supplies from grain harvests in coastal countries begin to move northward. Any prolonged disruption in, or early end to the rains should lead

to an immediate concern for addressing a potentially rapid deterioration of food security and further deterioration in the agro-pastoral and pastoral livelihoods.

17. What types of additional assistance are most needed, and by when?

The main focus of additional assistance, if it can be made available immediately, should be:

- **an augmentation of supplemental feeding for children under five;**
- **additional support for the GON's free food distributions;**
- **provision of emergency animal fodder and livestock nutritional supplements;**
- **assistance with sanitation and potable water (in areas with the highest malnutrition); and**
- **Seeds for second season cropping, especially short cycle beans.**

This problem will not be resolved without more attention and development resources being given to address chronic issues. Emergency assistance is not enough.

18. What is FEWS NET planning to do to enhance its monitoring?

FEWS NET has developed a monitoring plan to expand its early warning and food security monitoring and reporting coverage in Niger. Specifically, FEWS NET will:

- 1) increase its field capacity, placing new monitoring and analytical capacity in parts of the country that are food insecure, but where information is lacking;
- 2) increase its crisis management support to USAID (both in the field and Washington); and
- 3) increase national and regional monitoring and analysis of price and market analysis, in the smaller markets in agro-pastoral departments.

FEWS NET is also defining the Terms of Reference for an assessment of the way that the West African and Sahelian markets have functioned in past months.